

BOOK REVIEW

VIRGINIA SCOTT JENKINS. 2000. **Bananas. An American History.** (ISBN 1-56098-966-1, pbk.). Smithsonian Institute Press, 470 L'Enfant Plaza Suite 7100, Washington, DC 20560-0950, U.S.A. \$16.95 pbk., 232 pp., 36 b&w photos.

From the author of 1994's *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* comes a book about American culture, politics, and trade as related to all things, the banana. From its days of an exotic fruit for the rich (late 1800's), to its days of being cheap food for the poor, to its modern day ubiquity and subsequent absorption into American culture and everyday life, the banana has been a dynamic part of the last century of American history.

From the introduction, "...the twentieth century was to see a phenomenal growth in the banana-importing industry with the rise of giant multinational corporations. Bananas became the cheapest fruit in the grocery store throughout the year and taken for granted by consumers. The banana lost its exotic image and disappeared from the formal dinner table as it became the most widely eaten fruit in the United States." Not to indicate that this book is about the rise of the banana and its fall to mediocrity, however, this book is entertaining reading about the history of a staple fruit in the American diet.

In eight chapters, Jenkins covers everything you ever wanted to know about bananas. The first chapter covers the introduction of the banana to America in the nineteenth century. The second chapter traces the development of the major American banana-importing companies. Chapter 3 discusses the growth of modern transportation systems that helped put the banana in more homes nationwide. Chapter 4 is about the marketing and selling of bananas. Chapter five looks at public health and sanitation issues in relation to the popularization of the banana. Chapter 6, "Eating Bananas," discusses everything from the nineteenth century consumption of bananas on special occasions to the twentieth century banana split. The seventh chapter is devoted to two American cities, Fulton, Kentucky, and South Fulton, Tennessee, the banana capitals of the world- thanks, of course, to a connection in Central America. The final chapter looks at how bananas have become rooted in American life despite the fact that they have never been a selection of the fruit of the month club. Closing the book is an appendix of songs about bananas, notes, and an index.

Highlights of the book include accounts of the history of import trading of bananas with Central American countries and integration of this exotic fruit as a staple of an American diet. Bananas came from Jamaica, Honduras, various parts of Latin America and the Hawaiian islands and due to its versatility and nutritional value became a part of the American diet. Corporations that paid for advertisements and teaching items discussing the nutritional importance of the banana, its germ free packaging, and importantly its taste, no doubt had a small part to play in the popularization of the fruit. Marketed to children (read: future buyers) and the elderly, bananas became a necessity, and mostly, a part of breakfasts and desserts.

This book is intended for lay readers and it would be safe to presume that's where you will find the bulk of the readership. While it is extensively researched, it doesn't carry with it the socio-cultural insight and interpretation of Sidney Mintz's *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past* or his works on sugar and the Caribbean. It could work in classes of American history, political science, and anthropology due to it being both short and inexpensive, but only in conjunction with other more scientific books. In summary, it is enjoyable reading and anyone interested in American culture, international trade and politics and, of course, bananas will be interested.—Kevin D. Janni, *Botanical Research Institute of Texas*, kjanni@brit.org.